

Title	<Book Reviews>Alison M. Groppe 『Sinophone Malaysian Literature: Not Made in China』 Amherst: Cambria Press, 2013, x+325p.
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Citation	Southeast Asian Studies (2014), 3(3): 673-677
Issue Date	2014-12
URL	http://hdl.handle.net/2433/192786
Right	©Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University
Type	Journal Article
Textversion	publisher

Sinophone Malaysian Literature: Not Made in China

ALISON M. GROPPE

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Studies of the Chinese overseas have devoted substantial attention to Southeast Asia owing to deep historical connections forged by the overwhelming majority of Chinese migrants to the region. While historical and ethnographic approaches are common modes of inquiries, analyses of literary writings are seldom featured in the relevant scholarship (Liu 2006). From the perspective of modern Chinese literary studies in the English language academe, however, it is Southeast Asia that is an unfamiliar parameter of research. With recent calls by scholars to pay greater attention to “expressive documents” about Chinese migration in order to probe the Chineseness of displaced memories and desires, or to advocate a strategic focus on creative writings for exploring ambivalent Chinese sentiments in different world regions, the two fields have been set up for a productive dialogue and are currently experiencing exciting transformations (Wang 2007; Shih 2013).

Participating in the ongoing paradigm shift toward a global conception of Chinese literature and culture, Alison M. Groppe’s well-researched *Sinophone Malaysian Literature: Not Made in China* offers an excellent overview not only of salient works from a fascinating corpus that has thus far eluded English-language scholarship, but also of the lineage of approaches critical for grasping the larger ramifications arising from its anomalous status as “sectional literature” in Malaysia, where only literary works written in the national language of Malay are recognized as “national literature” (pp. 2, 282). The book leverages Malaysia for its unique insights about the adaptive experiences of China-origin people who account for a minority yet politically significant community residing outside the mainland Chinese state, Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan. Broadly speaking, Groppe explores the question of what it means “to be of Chinese descent and to be Chinese-speaking outside of China” (p. 25) primarily through examining modes of literary representations Malaysian-born writers employ to negotiate and express their layered ethnic and national identities in postcolonial Malaysia. In its focus on Malaysia as a vibrant location beyond China’s geopolitical borders that has nurtured an active contingent of innovative writers, the monograph joins E. K. Tan’s *Rethinking Chineseness: Translational Sinophone Identities in the Nanyang Literary World* (also published by Cambria Press in 2013) in ushering Southeast Asia into the horizon of modern Chinese literary studies (p. 283).

Chapter 1 maps the critical concepts that undergird Groppe’s ensuing interpretation of the complicated and multifarious relationships across the locales of China, Taiwan, and Malaysia that a compelling repertoire of Chinese-language narratives contemplates. Of crucial utility to Groppe is the notion of the Sinophone as “a network of places of cultural production” which, in her discourse, follows the coinage and explication by Shu-mei Shih (2013) who foregrounds its non-China and Sinitic traits. Groppe points out how Mandarin functions as the medium of Chinese education

and mass media for most of the twentieth century in Malaysia, where it co-exists with other Sinitic topolects including Hokkien, Cantonese, Teochew, Hakka, and Hainanese that arrived in tandem with Chinese migrants from China's southern provinces. At the same time that Sinophone Malaysian literature (hereafter SML) gives prominence to both the geographical origin of the writers and the linguistic medium of their works (pp. 5, 9–15), the book also draws upon the ideas of other interlocutors, such as Salman Rushdie, James Clifford, and Chow Tse-Tsung, to suggest an eclectic identification process evinced by migrant writers. Inspired also by Stuart Hall's processual perspective on identity, Groppe ultimately stakes her overarching claim that Sinophone Malaysian fiction should be valued for its ability to represent a distinctive "process of becoming rather than being" in the authorial subjects' self-reflexive search for suitable Chinese cultural identities (p. 22) enmeshed with local histories.

Chapter 2 surveys the cultural politics affecting the Malaysian field of Chinese literary production. Groppe contends, vis-a-vis literature written in creolized Baba Malay, English, and classical Chinese, that the self-conscious mediation of Chinese identities is more evident in the body of work initiated by the use of vernacular Chinese incubated by local newspaper supplements and Chinese language education for creative writings in early twentieth century (p. 29). By synthesizing critical ideas distilled from the scholarship of Fang Xiu, Tee Kim Tong, and Sharon Carstens, among others, she skillfully interweaves political milestones and literary development in British Malaya and postcolonial Malaysia to depict the broader challenges the Chinese community faces in advocating its ethnic cultural identification as a legitimate part of the hitherto Malay-centric national culture. Readers will become acquainted with literary polemics pertaining to issues about distinctive aesthetics, appropriation of traditional cultural symbols, canonization etc. that collectively refract an anxiety over the local creation of an autonomous subjectivity for SML. In this regard, as well as in light of her overall thrust to avoid privileging any particular genealogical bonds with Malaysia in the realm of Chinese cultural production, Groppe appears more sympathetic toward local efforts in the Southeast Asian state when she stresses that SML written and published in Taiwan "should not be taken as representing the whole or even necessarily the best of Sinophone Malaysian literature's past, present and future" (p. 52), despite its significant and conspicuous accomplishment in achieving literary distinction beyond the Malaysian shores.

Chapter 3 delves into the complex imbrication of language, place, and identity. Groppe relates the central predicament of authors to "the challenges of crafting their literary language in the northern-based topolect of Mandarin while writing of and within the Sinophone Southeast Asian (Nanyang) environment" (p. 58), a milieu that uses a variety of Sinitic topolects from southern China in everyday life. She parses the problematic through the discourse of the contemporary critic and writer Ng Kim Chew, focusing in particular his distinction between *zhongwen* and *huawen*—discrepant terms for the Chinese written language—that allows him to argue for two types of literary language, indicative of a China/Mandarin-oriented and a local Malaysian Chinese

cultural identification respectively. Following Ng's analytic, Groppe traces the historical contours of different formulations through which Sinophone Malayan and Malaysian authors have endeavored to foster a distinct literary voice through "a strategy of language differentiation" (p. 60) that bears out different shades of Chinese cultural identity. Whereas the earlier writers and critics were inclined to view literary language as a tool for accurate sociolinguistic representation, Ng, who is equipped with wider exposure to modernist models from China and Taiwan, is committed to harnessing topolectal colloquialism for innovation in literary aesthetics and reflections on marginality (p. 90). As Groppe astutely points out, despite great disparities in attitudinal and practical orientation, both sides sought the same recourse to spoken language as the favored cultural resource for fashioning a unique literary language for SML (pp. 72–73, 79–80, 86, 96). The final part of the chapter instantiates Stuart Hall's sustained influence on Groppe's argument, when she maintains the relevance of the notion of "minor literature" coined by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, in light of Ronald Bogue's characterization of it as a creative process and manner of literary writing rather than a niche typology of literary output.

The remaining chapters feature a series of author and thematic studies. It is to Groppe's credit that she has incorporated into her discussion figures such as Li Tianbao (Chapter 5) and Li Zishu (Chapter 7) whose creative orientations differ from that of a select group of Sinophone Malaysian writers who have been recruited thus far to illustrate the theoretical underpinnings of Sinophone studies centered on a critique of Sinocentrism. The pioneering nature of the monograph necessitates that these chapters must furnish substantial introductions to local sociopolitical circumstances, writers' personal trajectories, and plot synopses. Extending an approach from the previous chapter, Groppe continues to couple SML with critical concepts to accentuate its situated nature in the making of modern Chinese cultural identities in a globalizing world. In Chapter 4, Linda Hutcheon's "postmodern parody" is appropriated to read Ng Kim Chew's satirical tales, unified by a trope of quest revolving around a missing eminent author from China, the fascinating plots of which intimate the difficult cultivation of literary autonomy for Sinophone Malaysia due to the enduring influence of mainland Chinese writing traditions. Expanding the historical purview of Chua Beng Huat's formulation regarding "pop culture China," Chapter 5 pairs the author Li Tianbao with the Sarawak-born director Tsai Ming-liang to contend that, by referencing music and films from Shanghai, Hong Kong, and Taiwan from the earlier decades of the twentieth century, the aesthetic design of their works testifies to the well-established traffic of imagination, production, and consumption of Sinophone cultural products, as well as demonstrates the range of Malaysia's discursive and sentimental affiliations to multiple nodes in a network driven by an economy of popular culture. In Chapter 6, Svetlana Boym's notion of "reflective nostalgia" that underscores a critical self-reflexive element in the enactment of individual memories offers Groppe a conceptual launch pad for interpreting Li Yongping's narrative recollections about his hometown in Kuching. The autobiographical effect, the trope of displaced wandering in urban Taipei, where the protago-

nist shares his remembrances about Borneo through conversation, essentially becomes in Li's work, a coded style of introspection that negotiates the vexatious issues of home and diaspora, self-identity, and ethnic cultural identification. As Groppe rightly elucidates, Li's diasporic identity formation carries other anti-hegemonic valences evolved within a colonial setting that are belied by his Sinophilic image (pp. 203, 206). Public memory becomes the more encompassing rubric in Chapter 7 that covers works by Ng Kim Chew, Li Yongping, Zhang Guixing, and Li Zishu. Groppe treats their fictional writings that reflect upon the Malayan communist insurrections from late 1940s to 1960s as emblematic artifacts of what John Bodnar has termed "vernacular culture," a folk configuration of diversity committed to expressing the affective dimension of social realities as experienced by ordinary individuals, in contradistinction to the normative slant of official articulations (pp. 235–236).

While the monograph predominantly addresses fictional works read in the light of Sinophone theory, the conclusion briefly reverses the interpretive method by exploring how Sinophone Malaysian literary production can problematize the concerns of the Sinophone. Departing from existing deployments of the Sinophone concept that either includes or excludes China, Groppe reiterates the unique role Malaysia can play in reminding Sinophone theory to stay flexible, open-minded, and sensitive to the nuances of difference present in local history and literary arts arising from connectivity on multiple scales (pp. 280–281, 287–288). What deserves even greater appreciation is how she thoughtfully references "Why Sinophone Malaysian Literature?"—the profoundly influential 1993 essay by Lim Kien Ket, an important critical voice that has been conspicuously elided from the current spotlight on Malaysian Chinese literary production in English language scholarship. Responding to the query in the title of Lim's essay, she puts forth the value of studying SML's "transnational, traveling and even translingual" profile, as well as suggests its heuristic value for theorizing cultural relations between mainland China, Taiwan, and Southeast Asia (pp. 282–283).

Overall, with its comprehensive coverage, focused treatment, and lucid exposition, *Sinophone Malaysian Literature* marks a key reference volume in the English language on the topic. Not only does it succeed in pluralizing the scholarship on the Chinese overseas and modern Chinese literature, it also urges deeper dialogue with other fields of knowledge such as human geography and Southeast Asian Studies. It could be productive, for instance, to bring in Li Yongping's professed ambivalence over the classification of his works as "Sinophone Malaysian literature" (Chen and Mayer 1998), given that he grew up in colonial Sarawak and left North Borneo for Taiwan very soon after the colony joined the new political formation of Malaysia. Whether it is the geopolitical "Malaysia" denoting a national space of interpellation or Borneo as a native landscape for embodied dwelling that carries greater import for Li in his reconciliatory effort with his own ambiguous Chinese identity becomes a question that Groppe subtly broaches and invites deeper reflection (pp. 249, 278n5). In addition, Tee Kim Tong's thesis about "interference" from China's New Literature movement in early twentieth century (pp. 28, 285) and Groppe's delineation of the writers'

conscious strategy of “linguistic adaption” (p. 72) to suture spoken and literary language both suggest an underlying Sinophone ecology in situ. Echoing the long-standing interest in the construction of historical agency through processes such as “domestication” and “vernacularization” in Southeast Asian historiography (Reynolds 1995), such perspectives that assert local will and inventiveness when engaging foreign elements shore up peripheral avenues of research which now seem well worth pursuing. What are the other linguistic and literary modalities of artistic agency in Malaya/Malaysia over the past two centuries? How should one re-evaluate the historical conditions of co-existing or competing artistic practices bound to discrepant ideas and feelings of being Chinese? It is worthwhile to note that history and literature might view the discursive trope of “localization” through different optics, perceiving the process as either one of absorption of foreign influence, or one engaged in adaptation to new cultural contexts. Inquiries into overlapping or abutting configurations of Baba Malay literature, classical Chinese literature, and Anglophone literature that are regrettably less developed in Groppe’s discourse, then, hold great potential in developing a thicker biography of how the Sinophone comes to perform the local and becomes entangled with cultural modernity in the region. These issues notwithstanding, her laudable book-length study has laid a solid foundation upon which scholars can investigate further to yield fresher insights about the uneasy making of modern Sinophone Southeast Asian subjects and their hybrid cultural identities.

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